

Bishop Urges Church Action On AIDS Care

Put Aside Fears, Walker Counsels

By Marjorie Hyer
Washington Post Staff Writer

Episcopal Bishop John T. Walker of Washington has challenged church members to put aside fears and prejudices about AIDS and to take the lead both in caring for patients with the deadly disease and in educational efforts to stop its spread.

"The time has come for action on the part of the Christian church," Walker said in a two-page letter to be read in pulpits on or before Nov. 9, which the Episcopal Church has designated nationally as a day of prayer for persons with acquired immune deficiency syndrome and those who care for them.

The bishop rejected unequivocally the notion that AIDS, which hits hardest among homosexuals and intravenous drug users, is God's punishment. "Ours is a God of forgiveness and reconciliation who continually calls his people to repentance and new life in Him."

"If He visited all of those who sin with fatal diseases or natural disasters, the human race would have been wiped out long ago," the bishop said.

Walker's call is characteristic of growing numbers of church leaders who are trying to lead their people through the emotional and theological thicket that surrounds the AIDS crisis.

Roman Catholic Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin of Chicago last week issued a 12-page policy paper establishing sweeping pastoral initiatives, including an education program in parochial schools and parishes, an office of pastoral care coordinator for AIDS ministry and a call to the 446 parishes in his jurisdiction to "open their doors and their hearts to those touched in any way by AIDS."

In August, Roman Catholic Archbishop James A. Hickey of Washington announced the transformation of the Catholic Charities center in Northeast Washington into a convent, staffed by nuns of Mother Teresa's order, to care for destitute AIDS patients. A similar convent is already operating in New York City under the sponsorship of Cardinal John O'Connor.

Seventeen local Episcopal par-

ishes have joined forces as the Episcopal Caring Response Committee and are raising funds for a residence for five AIDS patients, administered by the Whitman-Walker Clinic. The Northwest Washington house accommodates persons with AIDS "who are well enough to care for themselves physically but are too ill to support themselves financially," said Ted Heath, spokesman for the committee.

The 20 Catholic bishops of California have publicly denounced—and urged Catholics to reject—a proposition sponsored by followers of political extremist Lyndon H. LaRouche Jr. in Tuesday's election mandating the quarantining of persons with AIDS.

Representatives of the Southern Baptist Convention's Christian Life Commission met in August with Surgeon General C. Everett Koop for a briefing on the development of educational materials on AIDS. The commission also will distribute to the 14.5 million-member church Koop's report released last week calling for AIDS education beginning at the elementary school level.

In April, more than 100 church workers from a variety of denominations responded on relatively short notice to an invitation from the Episcopal diocese of Washington to an all-day consultation on AIDS ministry. The Catholic archdiocese has scheduled a similar workshop Monday at the Church of the Nativity.

Most of these initiatives were undertaken before last week's release of the surgeon general's report detailing the alarming spread of AIDS and calling for greatly expanded education programs throughout society on sex, drugs, and AIDS. But the fact that Koop is widely identified as an active evangelical Christian is expected to ease the way for church educators.

In calling for compassionate involvement with the AIDS crisis, Catholic leaders have walked a particularly fine line in respecting the church's condemnation of homosexual behavior, reinforced again by a Vatican pronouncement yesterday.

Walker, in his pastoral letter, cautioned against efforts "to distinguish between the 'guilty' and the 'innocent,' between the promiscuous person or the drug user." Jesus did not make such judgments, he said, adding, "Our calling is not that of judging but of serving."

Walker wrote that "responsible Christians" must provide educational programs in churches and Sunday schools on "the realities of AIDS," and support for such programs in public schools. "If we are afraid to talk about these things in church school and adult education programs, then we must take some of the blame for the continued presence of this epidemic," he said.